

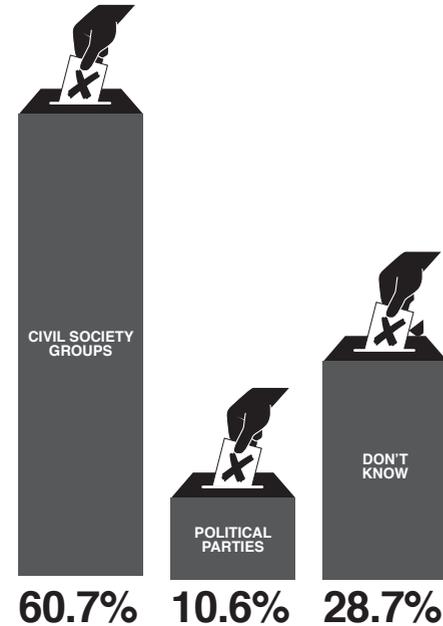


**UNIONS AND DEMOCRACY  
A UNIONS21 DEBATE PIECE**

Unions21 Registered Office:  
Unions21  
c/o ATL  
7 Northumberland Street  
London, WC2N 5RD  
www.Unions21.org.uk

# Polling of 1000+ working people performed by Survation in February 2014

Which of the following do you feel are more likely to stand up for people like you?



18.6%

“ I’m comfortable with the relative political influence of big businesses vs “civil society groups” like trade unions and charities ”

49.7%

“ I think big businesses have too much influence compared to “civil society groups” like trade unions and charities ”

13.2%

“ I think “civil society groups” like trade unions and charities have too much influence compared to big businesses ”

18.5%

“ Don't know ”

# About this publication

Dan Whittle, Director of Unions21

A major change in the legislation governing political campaigning, the Lobbying Bill, became law in January and the Labour Party made changes to their relationship with affiliated unions in March. The Unions21 steering committee therefore decided that this was a good time to investigate the role of unions in our democracy.

Participation in politics is changing, with political Party membership having declined to around 1% while online petitions and social media campaigns make engaging with single issue politics easier and quicker than ever.

A glance at the public polling we undertook reminds us that rather than the influence on politics of trade unions and civil society groups, it is that of big business that is of greater concern to working people.

A ComRes poll for the Independent found that since the reforms to Labour's relationship with the trade unions 46% of the public believe that the unions have too much influence over the Labour Party, while 40% disagree with this statement. One in three people who support Labour (32%) agree that the unions enjoy too much power, but 59% of them disagree. A majority of Labour supporters (59%) think the reforms will make the Party more democratic, but 23% disagree.

44% of people agree that "the relationship between the Conservatives and big business is more of a problem than Labour's relationship with the trade

unions," while 37% disagree.

Our own polling found people are 6 times more likely to believe unions and civil society groups are likely to stand up for 'people like them' than political parties. These results are for politicians to reflect on. However, the Unions21 consultation with Parliamentarians found that there are lessons for union campaigners, too.

Comments from MPs who responded to our survey included praise for USDAW's respect for shopworkers campaign, UNISON's legal challenge to the imposition of Employment Tribunal fees – other campaigns mentioned included the minimum wage and Living Wage campaigns, blacklisting, disability discrimination issues and a specific victory on rates of pay for visual artists in Scotland.

MPs said that they believed unions were most effective on the issues of employment rights, health and safety and equality. They remarked that they would like briefings from unions on legislation, and also localised constituency information on local employers and the successes of unions. One MP said the briefings should be factual rather than political in nature.

An MP commented that it would be good to have the contact details of local union representatives so that he could engage with them. Another suggested that unions provide a 'day in the life' feature for politicians about

general secretaries, to promote a better understanding of what unions do – this is an idea that will be put to the Unions21 steering committee.

MPs responding to our survey backed the suggested idea of a new media display in Parliament for people outside parliament to take part in the debate. 3 in 4 of them were in favour of: A display on the Parliamentary estate whereby groups and individuals can contribute online comments alongside Parliamentary debate.

When asked how unions could improve their political campaigning, MPs mainly took issue with confrontational or partisan tactics, and the use of union officers as advocates rather than 'ordinary working people'. It was also advised that campaigns should be tightly focused rather than on general issues.

In our survey of trade union activists there was near consensus on the question of unions working in coalition. Nine in ten activists believed unions were more effective when campaigning alongside other organisations. Many who took part in the survey were keen to share their experiences with us. Their views fit well with the work Unions21 did last year bringing together best practice on community coalition building for the publication 'The Future for Union Community Organising'.

## Unions21 Survey of trade unionists

When unions work with other organisations to campaign, do you think they are more effective or less effective? Somewhat or much more effective: 88.9%

Charities, National Campaign Groups and Online networks such as 38 Degrees and Change.org were identified by trade unionists as the campaigning partners they viewed as most effective.

One union activist commented that

they felt it was difficult to "get through to MPs who hide behind Parliamentary procedure". This mirrors the view expressed by some MPs that they would like to have more direct contact with union reps.

Whether from the viewpoint of politicians, unions or public opinion, we seem to be at a crossroads for unions and democracy. This publication provides articles from authors who present many ideas and opportunities to enable unions to take a full and effective part in the democratic life of our country. We hope it will stimulate the much needed debate around these issues.



Unions and politics – The Unions21 events space at Labour Party Conference 2013

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>p06</b>
<hr/>	
Ian Lavery MP – Chair of the Trade Union Group of MPs	
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>p08</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Union Voice: Surviving the Lobbying Bill</b>	
Parmjit Dhanda, Parliamentary, Media and Campaigns Officer, Prospect	
<b>Unions and the Lobbying Bill</b>	<b>p11</b>
<hr/>	
Tom Jones, Head of Policy at Thompsons Solicitors	
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>p14</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Labour and the unions</b>	
Hugh Lanning, former deputy general secretary of PCS	
<b>Being Political</b>	<b>p20</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Case study</b>	
John Smith, General Secretary of the Musicians' Union	
<b>Why a trade union voice in politics matters</b>	<b>p22</b>
<hr/>	
Mick Whelan, General Secretary of ASLEF	

# Foreword

Ian Lavery MP, Chair of Trade Union Group of MPs

It is astonishing to me that there should be any need to make the case for the involvement of trade unions in democracy. Yet almost every week at Prime Minister's Questions, Labour Members of Parliament are harangued for being Trade Unionists. The sublime irony of the leader of a Party funded by shady donations from the murkiest corners of big business, who have paid back their donations with government gold several fold, questioning the finances of the trade union link, is not lost. But as this government dare to go where even Margaret Thatcher dared not tread, they need an enemy.

Since 2010 a right wing government has rolled up its sleeves and set to work attacking ordinary people with vigour. The Conservative led coalition have set an ideological agenda, which their Lib Dem cohorts have readily supported, that sets to roll back the welfare state and the rights of ordinary men and women. These are gains that have been made over generations by the Labour and Trade Union movement. Is it any wonder they want to frame the Unions as the bad guys?

How can the voice of a movement, representing ordinary men and women up and down the country in a wide range of professions and industries, in politics be questioned? The link between the Trade Unions and Labour is the link which connects the Party, with a membership of

200,000, to millions of ordinary working people across Britain. The Trade Union link is the Labour Party's oxygen, an essential connection from the Westminster bubble to real life.

As a graduate of that oft mentioned school of moderacy, the National Union of Mineworkers, I am a proud trade unionist. Some fantastic work takes place in Westminster and beyond between Labour politicians and trade unions. As Chair of the Trade Union Group of Labour MPs I see and am involved first hand in some of this work in Parliament.

A recent pertinent example would be the work between Trade Unionists and Labour MPs to have a full debate in Parliament on the injustice surrounding the Shrewsbury 24. The government's decision not to release papers relating to the 1972 building dispute and subsequent prosecution of trade unionists known as the Shrewsbury 24 caused widespread concern throughout the Labour and Trade Union Movement.

My friend and comrade Dave Anderson secured this debate with the full support of the Trade Unions who wanted a positive conclusion to this four decade old injustice. These were men participating in the, so far, first and only, national building strike. Men working in an extremely dangerous environment, who ended up achieving an unprecedented rise in pay. This was a union who had difficulty in organising

and yet managed to deal a huge blow to the establishment. They were however swiftly hit with the full force of the state in retribution.

This was a peaceful dispute over safety and health and pay and conditions. Yet there are men who for forty years have been treated as criminals, six of them were jailed. This was an important debate to highlight a long running injustice, which questioned just what lengths the government was prepared to go to in order to seek retribution against trade unionists. My own experience of the states might being used against working people during the Miners strike may have been born out of their success in attacking the Shrewsbury pickets and then covering up their dastardly deeds in the name of the "National interest".

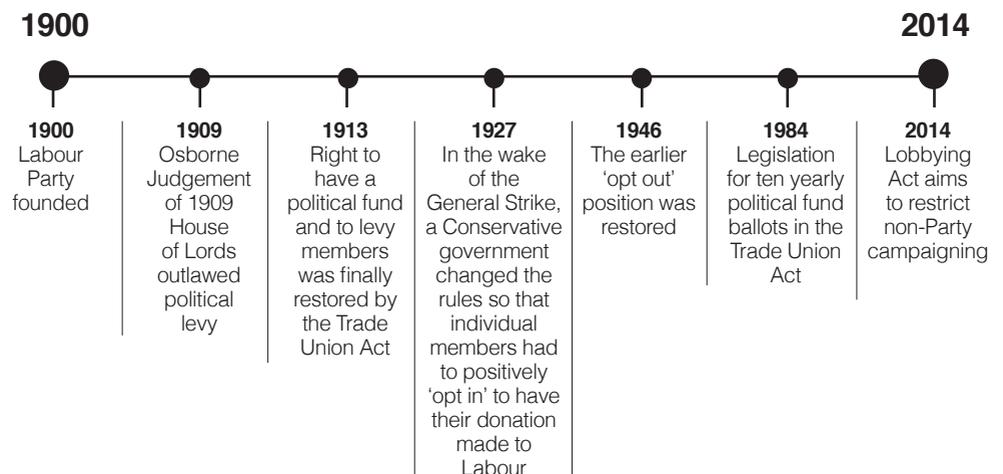
It is in cases like these where we work best together. It is an example of the plethora of issues which cross the boundary between the Labour movement and the Trade Union movement and serve to demonstrate the hand in glove relationship between the two.

It is to our eternal shame that there are some within our own Party who would

sever this essential relationship tomorrow. Those who refuse to listen to the voice of ordinary men and women who the trade unions represent should take a long hard look at themselves.

The Collins report, though perhaps born out of the wrong reasons, is a timely review of the link. The relationship between the Party and the unions was becoming stale and moving towards being a purely financial one. Constituency Labour Parties up and down the country will pay testament to the fact that without their trade unionists who are also Party members, they would wither and die. This review must put the membership back into the heart of the Party.

Whatever the implications further down the line we need to embrace one another and to freshen up our approach to politics. We need a link where, through cooperation, we build the national institutions of the 21st century, meeting the aspirations of millions of ordinary people. In a marriage as close as this their will always be disagreements but we need to work to iron them out so ordinary people have the best representation possible, industrially and politically.



Timeline - with thanks to assistance from Jim Moher

# Chapter 1

---

## Union Voice – Surviving the Lobbying Bill

By Parmjit Dhanda, Parliamentary, Media and Campaigns Officer, Prospect

### Facing up to the problem

It's a tough time to be a trade unionist. The industrial challenges have never been greater. At no time in the post war era have so many public sector jobs been shed over such a short period of time (now in excess of 700,000 since the election).

In some industries private sector jobs are taking a severe hit too, for instance the impact on the private sector of the announcement to end shipbuilding in Portsmouth is seismic. There is no shortage of issues for trade unions to tackle, but with fires ablaze on every front and the attack on trade unions and their leaders becoming ever fiercer, the danger is we will curl up in a ball and await a sunnier day.

Rather than curling up in a ball, we could of course go to the other extreme, declare war on the government and be as obstructive as possible until the government changes direction. Unfortunately it won't. And we don't need to look back too far in to the political past to see that if you await the sunny day for a return of a Labour government, sometimes you end up waiting longer than you had hoped.

The government has a clear narrative on trade unions that we have a responsibility to challenge. Last year the Prime Minister began to turn his focus on trade unions at Prime Minister's Questions like never before. As well as painting trade unions (he would claim trade union leaders)

as enemies of the state and barriers to economic growth, Cameron wants to portray them as the purchasers of Labour Party leaders and Labour Party policies.

This is a million miles from the daily reality of what happens in trade union offices up and down the land. Like most unions the one I work for (Prospect) isn't even affiliated to a political Party. But the Cameron assault impacts on all of us, and has laid the groundwork for his 'Lobbying Bill'.

It would be foolhardy for the union movement to walk away from political engagement. Without a political voice, we'll be letting down members and failing to face up to the challenges they face at work. They need us to engage at a policy level to find solutions for their problems. But we may now need to look at different ways to influence policy.

### New opportunities

The Lobbying Bill is designed to constrict trade unions and charities like never before, never mind the impacts it will have on free speech. Even in a trimmed down version, it will clip the wings of trade unions and many other organisations as we campaign for our causes in the run up to an election.

This 'Gagging Bill' poses some new and interesting questions for trade unions - how do we continue to influence policy now that it is here?

In my former life as a MP for a marginal seat, I relied on financial support from the trade union movement. Raising fifty quid from a jumble sale or a quiz night whilst my opponents were carpet bombing my constituency with glossy leaflets funded by Lord Ashcroft meant that I needed union money just to keep some kind of parity in campaigning. The Lobbying Bill will put even more fury and distance between the parties on the issue of funding. But let's put funding to one side for the moment.

The question for trade unions is this, if there are to be new restrictions on your spending, and therefore your influence, then what can you do differently to mitigate this? The question has been imposed upon us, but we have to answer it.

I think the answer is partly in the largely unrecognised work unions have done for so many years; evidence and values based policy research. Many politicians, I would go so far to say most politicians, are not aware of the level of research work that takes place in-house in individual trade unions. UK politicians are far less resourced in terms of policy research than most of their contemporaries in the Western world. Yet few of them reach out to build alliances with trade unions to harness the policy research that goes on there.

Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum, including Labour, have largely missed out. I put it down to the pressure of their constituency roles, which leave them more inclined to wait for union campaigns to join, rather than being more proactive in working with unions to develop policy, in conjunction with what's happening at a constituency level. Small and specialist unions are particularly overlooked for their value in this area.

In my experience at Prospect, something interesting has developed over the last four years which has opened up the union voice in politics in an unusual way. It's called

coalition government, and a rocky majority. It has opened up some new opportunities.

### Being Heard in Different Quarters

Coalition politics has changed the way we do things as a union, and will do so for others too. There are pinch points in this government - not just the Lib Dems, but backbench Tories have become disproportionately influential through their independent nature. Rebellion has bred rebellion, as we have seen time and again in the last three years. We've seen u-turns over the sell-off of the national forests, regional pay, childcare staffing ratios in nurseries, Europe, the pasty tax and military action in Syria. I could go on.

The changing dynamics of government has created, not an open door, but one that is at least ajar for unions. Recall when the coalition was pushing for regional pay to be introduced. Prospect hosted a breakfast meeting for Lib Dem MPs. Not something we have done very often, but it was the second occasion within three months. Turnout was unexpectedly good. There was real engagement on our concerns over public sector reforms and regional pay. The collective lobbying of this group by a number of well-informed organisations with quality research helped to precipitate the letter in the Guardian attacking regional pay, which was signed by 25 Lib Dem MPs. If not dead, the policy lies dormant now.

Backbench Lib Dems and Tories are responding more positively to invitations to talk. Internet based campaigns involving interest groups have softened them up, making them more inclined to listen. The interest in many cases is because they've never been asked before, or don't expect to be approached by us. There is curiosity at first, and then often surprise at the depth of our research. It doesn't fit Cameron's stereotype for us, and we have to chip away at that. Slender majorities lead to

greater interest from the front benches in what is being said by those on the back benches. This is a mix of circumstance that can advance the cause of trade unions.

A key element to this is quality research, coupled with precise engagement, focussed at the government's pinch points.

There can be no guarantee that the Tories or the Lib Dems will be vanquished from power at the next election. As trade unions we have largely faced up to the reality that an outright war with this government isn't about to result in victory. So we have to be more creative to ensure the union voice is heard on individual issues in a more nuanced and targeted way. At Prospect we're trying to take that a step further.

### **The union manifesto**

With so many political uncertainties for the government to negotiate and with the opposition looking to build a political argument, now is the ideal time for trade unions to put down their own policy markers.

I've been working on the Prospect Pledge Campaign, which is our own policy framework for the next parliament. It was a conscious decision to get in there early, with just over a year to the election - the key 'thinking time' for the parties as they consider their manifestos. There are many things on our wish-list, but there is also enough savvy to recognise that (1) we have to focus on limited political attention spans and (2) we have a better chance of succeeding if we can create political consensus around the policies we are pushing.

It's a challenge to get this right; to be crisp without being lightweight in our demands; to be challenging without being offensive; and to be constructive without selling out.

Our policy framework calls for (1) a new government target for women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and

maths) careers by the year 2020; (2) an independent pay review for skilled civil servants; (3) a change to state funded procurement to make sure that government funding ties in decent workplace rights; (4) a stronger commitment to skills in low carbon energy – including new nuclear; (5) a stronger one to one rapport in constituencies between our members and their MPs.

We believe it's a radical and well researched package that should engender cross-Party support.

# The Lobbying Bill – A Briefing

Tom Jones, Head of Policy at Thompsons Solicitors

The clumsily-titled 'Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill 2013-14' (or TU Admin Bill) is the government's misguided and mishandled attempt to 'reform' lobbying, clamp down on pernicious interference with parliamentarians and the political process, and make limits on the extent that 'non-Party' political organisations like unions can carry out campaigning and fundraising in the run-up to general elections.

The Bill will, when passed into Law, hit unions where it hurts – in their membership and in their campaigning.

Unions are already subject to regulation on political campaigning, this new regime will ramp up that pressure. Unions already - as is their duty and as is in their interest - keep effective membership records; this will force them to do even more, and be subject to the long arm of the government's new 'assurer'. In the one area where there is a real need to make reforms – shedding light on the shadowy world of political lobbying – the government has, typically, avoided causing any real problems for its friends in big business.

### **Tackling lobbying and 'improving' politics**

The Trade Union Admin Bill is a thinly veiled shackling of the unions dressed up as an attempt at 'improving' politics. In fact the

reforms it will implement are weaker than even the professional lobbying industry has called for.

One of the Bill's major failures is that it attempts to reform the world of transparent lobbying and public affairs, while largely ignoring the less regulated yet highly influential world of in-house lobbying. The people who work for the insurance companies and multinational blue chip corporations will have open lobbying activities, of course, but it's the private direct access to those at the top of government that really counts and they are entirely without the scope of these proposals.

It doesn't take a genius to work out how many egg shells would be broken if more than scant attention were paid to the lobbying world's underbelly: complete implementation of Civil Justice reforms after private meetings at Number 10; the overt ramping up of the compensation culture and whiplash debates; and delivery on a plate of the Mesothelioma Bill on exactly the terms the insurers agreed behind closed doors - not a bad score sheet (so far) for the insurance industry with this government.

### **Existing controls on union political campaigning**

As is the trend with this government, there is one rule for big business and another for

unions and the millions of working people they represent.

Part 2 of the Bill seeks to regulate how 'non-Party' groups with a political agenda, such as unions and for that matter many charities, can carry out campaigning in the run-up to a general election.

This is unnecessary, however, as unions are already subject to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 which restricts activities and, like all groups (and individuals over a certain level) unions and other 'unincorporated associations' are required to report financial gifts to political parties.

The fact of the matter is that unions are already highly regulated and subject to far stricter conditions than many other organisations with a political agenda. There is no equivalent law to govern how private companies use their cash reserves. If, say, a multi-million pound insurance company wishes to make a large donation to the Conservative Party then they can do so without fear of regulation. All it needs (at most) is a line in accounts to cover a multitude of sins.

This begs the question "why are new laws required?" The answer is because campaign organisations shine lights where this government doesn't want them shone. The government's motivation is political manoeuvring of which Machiavelli would be proud.

### **Part 3 of the TU Admin Bill**

The Bill's unwarranted attack on unions continues with Part 3. In reality, Part 3 really has nothing at all to do with the lobbying industry and was the carrot to keep government backbenchers on board. It is a Trojan horse built to satisfy the government's appetite to hit the unions by imposing onerous new requirements on the maintenance of members' information and how this is made available to the government.

### **Part 3 will:**

- Create of a new role of an 'Assurer' from among 'qualified independent persons' as defined by the Secretary of State;
- Require the vast majority of unions (those with more than 10,000 members) to submit to the Certification Officer (CO) an annual 'Membership Audit Certificate' prepared by an Assurer, in addition to the current duty to submit an annual return;
- Give the Assurer the right to access union membership records at all 'reasonable' times and powers to require officers, including branch officers, to provide information;
- Give the CO the power to require the production of relevant documents and to make copies of them, including membership records and private correspondence from 'anyone who appears...to be in possession of them if there is a good reason to do so';
- Permit the CO to appoint inspectors, including from outside his own staff, to mount investigations with similarly wide-ranging powers to require the production of documents, including membership records.
- Arm the CO with enforcement powers that have the status of a court order.

Under the guise of more transparency and accountability, Part 3 will increase the likelihood of under-resourced unions slipping up on administrative procedures and, therefore undermine their ability to successfully pursue actions against unscrupulous employers.

Unions already have to comply with various rules on the maintenance of membership information. For example, when it comes to unions' political funds, the Certification Officer – a dedicated "union referee" – requires unions to maintain reliable and up to date records. Similarly, unions have to carry out periodic data cleansing and be proactive in asking members to make them aware of changes

to address and so on.

The TU Admin Bill, in its intention to put onerous and potentially illegal (think privacy in the European Convention on Human Rights Act) provisions for accessing the sensitive personal data of millions of union members, reveals a government contemptuous of the role played by unions in an efficient, motivated and safe workforce. They are restrictions the government would never place on private companies that donate £millions to a political Party.

While many private corporations enjoy cosy relations with the government, the unions, who are a central pillar of a healthy democracy and represent seven millions workers in the private and state sectors working hard to make ends meet in a tough economic climate, are openly attacked.

### **A level playing field this is not. The Trade Union Admin Bill as it stands**

As it stands, the privacy of seven million trade union members remains threatened by the Bill. Key – and eminently reasonable – amendments proposed by Labour peer Lord Monks were rejected in January.

Lord Monks' amendments simply sought compliance with the law: to place a duty of confidentiality on the assurer and commit the assurer to work within the Data Protection Act 1998 in protecting sensitive personal data. As drafted (and as it currently stands) the actions possible under the Bill will be in breach of the Data Protection Directive and constitute a clear and unwarranted attack on union members.

A government that didn't think that business is always right would seek to build a regulatory landscape where unions were, at the very least, on an equal footing with other organisations, and where the expectation that unions give the government access to private details of their members was mirrored in the expectation that other similar organisations,

such as political parties, did the same.

If the government listened more to the voices of unions and the millions of men and women they represent – many of whom the government will be tapping up for their vote in 2015 – then a Bill that represents the needs of all for a genuinely more transparent and fair system, would be possible.

The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill 2013-14 looks set to become an Act of Parliament later in the year.

# Chapter 2

## Labour and the unions

### Hugh Lanning, former deputy general secretary of PCS

#### A total eclipse of labour

I vaguely remember Venn diagrams from school. They used circles to describe the relationship between different sets of things or people. In the early days of the Labour Party, if you did a Venn diagram of trade unionists, trade unions and Labour Party members – it would have been a total eclipse. Labour Party members were trade unionists in trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party. A virtual and virtuous circle; not surprising as the unions had just set up and established the Labour Party.

Locally trade unionists were predominantly in or supporters of the Labour Party, they worked with each other in related industries, lived in the same communities, went to the same pubs and churches. There was a strong common bond that linked them all. From day one unions had seen the need for a symbiotic relationship with politics and the need to have a political Party for working people.

Now the picture has changed. If you drew the same diagram – it would be a very partial eclipse. Many Labour Party members are not trade unionists, most unions are not affiliated to the Labour Party, and the majority of trade unionists are not Labour Party members nor belong to an affiliated union nor pay a levy to the Party. If you look at the bonds that link the various sets now they are much weaker and more diverse. They don't live and work in the same communities or types of traditional industries – many of which no longer exist.

More are women, work in the public sector or service industries, many commute and drive to work – not walk or go by bus. They are multi-cultural – not all white, males.

#### Whose Party is it anyway?

The clue is in the title. It is the Labour Party - not labour's Party. The Party belongs to the organisation, not to labour. Notwithstanding this, the 1918 Labour Party manifesto was comfortable in demanding "the fullest recognition and utmost extension of trade unionism, both in private employment and in the public services." Something it would be a pleasant surprise to see in the next manifesto.

It went on to say that: "It works for an altogether higher status for labour, which will mean also better pay and conditions. The national minimum is a first step, and with this must go the abolition of the menace of unemployment, the recognition of the universal right to work or maintenance, the legal limitation of hours of labour, and the drastic amendment of the Acts dealing with factory conditions, safety, and workmen's compensation."

Much of this the modern Labour Party might say – albeit in current parlance – apart from the first sentence; the higher status of labour and better pay. This reflects that changed relationship. Labour no longer neither sees itself nor wants to be seen as the Party of labour, rather the language is of work, of effort and reward.

Given this historical trend in the composition of the Party and unions, it would be a mistake in the long term to narrowly review just the link – the formal relationship of the affiliated unions to the Labour Party. It can only produce a sticking plaster, not a sustainable solution. If the Labour Party really does value its relationship with the unions it has to become a Party of labour once again. A Party aiming to be a voice for all the people at work, their families and communities. A broad group – the working class, the squeezed and middle classes – the 90%.

The same could be said of the trade union movement – it needs to discover ways to move outside of its heartlands, to seek to be an equivalent, but different voice, of labour. Therefore the critical issue for the future is not the link – it is to review how the changed demographic reality affects how unions, working people and political parties – the Labour Party in particular – relate to each other.

#### Pies and the working class.

More maths – this time pie charts. If you did a pie chart of labour - people at work – over half the pie (about 60%) would be neither in a trade union nor the Labour Party. The next biggest slice would be those in a union, but not in the Labour Party. Only then - the third biggest slice, once the whole pie - would you get those both in a union and the Labour Party by one route or another.

Interestingly there aren't that many more actual full fee paying members of the Labour Party in the affiliated unions compared to non-affiliated unions. One of the biggest single occupational groups as individual members is teachers and lecturers – none of whose many unions is affiliated. Some might even have noticed them at constituency meetings – the quiet ones in the corner!

The problem with the discussion about the link is that it has focussed on just one

slice of the pie – not the whole pie, the full range of relationships.

#### Special, but not exclusive

It would be bizarre if there wasn't a much closer relationship between the Party and those unions that are affiliated to it. Affiliation is a process with more meaning than just passing money – it is meant to represent shared values. Therefore Labour's relationship with the affiliated unions should be a special relationship – any organisation listens more and works more closely with its members, funders and founders. In most unions debates around affiliation are often controversial – more commonly these days debates are around campaign and pressure groups: Amnesty International, CND or Palestine Solidarity. The sums of money are often quite small to affiliate – but the public statement is huge. It means you agree with or share the objectives of the organisation. It is not just a subscription to a club.

In the past, this link between the affiliated unions and Labour could be not just special, but an exclusive relationship - because it was effectively encompassing the majority of trade unionists. It cannot now and still be representative in the same way. This changing and evolving relationship means both the affiliated unions and the Party have to do business differently. It means the unions cannot now – if they ever could - rely on constitutional means to ensure the Party will do as they want. It means they have to campaign inside and outside the Party for the policies their members want. It means they have to work harder, it means they have to talk to other parties and political players – it becomes more about alliance building than relying on passing motions.

Conversely – it means the Party has to listen more, find and retain broad areas of agreement with its central pillar of support. As there is no automaticity in the relationship, it has to be worked on

harder – because there will not be, cannot be, total loyalty anymore – either way. But the politics is not only changed in this direct way. The Party and unions need to consider their relationships with the other slices of the pie.

### Outside the tent

What about those unions, now the majority of unions and trade unionists, who are not-affiliated? Do they just sit idly by or remain on the outside looking in. In reality a lot of trade unionists in non-affiliated unions are or have been Labour sympathetic. A significant number are members personally. As the majority of non-affiliated unions are in the public sector, they have a very strong interest in the policies of a potential Labour Government. Policies on health, education, tax and benefits critically affect their members – as users of those services, taxpaying citizens and trade unionists.

Many of the non-affiliated unions are post Second World War creations; professional or staff bodies that have morphed into unions and affiliated to the TUC. Nearly all have political funds now – mostly as a response to the Thatcher Government bringing in more restrictions on how unions could spend their money. The threat was that many normal union campaigning activities would become defined as 'political'. The response by the non-affiliated unions was to ballot to establish political funds – almost always expressly not to affiliate to Labour, rather to continue representing their members properly within a democratic society. To have the means to be their voice.

Ironically for the Tory Government, one of the un-intended consequences of this – was that these unions, in responding as they did, have become over time more politically active, not less. They have the means to set up Parliamentary Groups, to campaign around elections in a much more direct way than previously. This has taken

a variety of forms – common has been campaigning against far-right and fascist parties. But almost universally these unions have seized the opportunity to take their industrial agendas into the political arena. Most keeping their distance from formal contact with Labour politically

In the union where I was an officer – the PCS (Public and Commercial Services union) – we developed a member centred campaign called Make Your Vote Count. It encouraged members to participate in the political process – particularly to register and vote in elections. But it took it to the next level – employing activists as organisers in pre-election periods – the union sought to take members' issues to the candidates. Not just Labour Party, but all democratic parties – with the replies and responses feed back to members. Apart from just encouraging democratic participation, it was directly trying to apply pressure to get candidates and parties to commit to policies the union supported. A quantum leap from the position of one of its predecessor unions – the Civil Service Union (CSU) – which had a cold war clause in its constitution preventing discussing "politics"! This evolution has taken place in most non-affiliated unions – with teaching, health and other civil service unions having developed election and political strategies.

The politics of the day not only affects the members of unions but also the health and well-being of the unions themselves. Membership fluctuates up and down with the rise and fall of their sectors. Witness the growth of the teaching unions under Labour and the decline in membership of the main civil service union, PCS, under this Government. This has nothing to do with the relative merits of the unions or their leaderships – it is just a reflection of the industrial reality, of the political and economic change. In the same way as the old, traditional blue-collar union strongholds faded with their industries – be it mining, shipbuilding, docks, steel or print.

As a result of these changes public service workers have become a key group for the future of the labour movement – whether affiliated or not. The Labour Party needs to address and win their support and trust. For the same reasons, they are a group the government is seeking to undermine – now openly attacking the ability of public sector unions to organise. They have become one of the last remaining obstacles in the way of the dismantling and fragmentation of the public provision of public services within a universal welfare state.

### Beyond the limits

The next group - beyond the limits of our current structures - are the biggest cluster. That is the vast and increasing group of people at work not in a union or the Labour Party or probably any other political organisation. How do they influence their world, their place of work? By and large they don't.

The trite solution is to say get organised – join a union or a Party. But in most of their workplaces the opportunity does not exist. The union to represent these people has not been invented yet or if it has they unfortunately work in a part it has not reached. In reality they are not represented within the labour and trade union movement. They are spoken about or to – but no-one truly speaks for them.

And beyond them there is an even wider world. Those not in work - the unemployed, young, old, women, carers. Immigrant and migrant workers. People related to or dependent on - directly or indirectly - those lucky enough to be in work.

It is here that the unions and Labour faces its biggest challenge. For the unions – whether affiliated or not - they can remain sectional interests, representing an ever-decreasing part of the totality of labour. They will remain powerful in their worlds, relevant in their sectors, influential in their professions and trades; but they

will not be able to lay claim to the title of being the workers' representatives – only of some, the better paid in better jobs. For the Labour Party – how do they talk, relate to this group. If it cannot be done through the unions, it is not going to be done through the local parties. They are not fit for this purpose, not least because they are primarily comprised of people drawn from the same demographic territory as the unions. They are not bursting with members in that wider world currently suffering – first hand - the full brunt of this Government's attacks on benefits, living standards and public services..

### Opportunities and threats

For both Labour and unions there are opportunities and threats. They can remain enmeshed and intertwined in a purely formalistic way. Alternatively they can give each other enough freedom and flexibility to breathe the new life into the movement that is so desperately needed. The proposed reforms offer both an opportunity and a threat – depending on whether both the Party and the unions rise to the challenge they pose.

For theirs is a shared purpose. The Labour Party is a major political organisation; it wants to be a Party of Government. Unions need to be able to influence it. Labour wants union support. Workers and their families need the help and support of both.

Traditionally a debate on the link inevitably focuses on one aspect of Labour's relations with trade unions. The normal assumption behind the link debate is that there is only one relationship route that counts – but, in reality, they will all matter.

Labour needs to have a strategy in relation to all unions and all trade unionists. It cannot be the same strategy, tactics or relationship as its needs a positive attitude from them all and they have different, if overlapping, interests. This requires a

different communications strategy for each – with common, but not identical messages; identifying areas of agreement, not difference. Both Labour and the unions need to review each and every relationship and see how to improve it.

Labour must move on from the view of the last administration – as a union you are either for us or against us. It is either total loyalty or you are an enemy. An attitude developed when in government with a large majority. A position that is unlikely to be repeated following the next election. If Labour has a small majority or is in coalition, it will need unions and the public to apply pressure and give support to its policies that are being resisted. Members in the Labour Party who are not union members need to learn to love and understand unions and their members as allies, not enemies, and not just at election time.

Reviewing the precise mechanics of the link, might prove to be okay as a tactic, but it is an incomplete strategy. It will not resolve problems of policy. Policies need to be developed that find areas of agreement that facilitate building alliances around issues of common cause. There is no automaticity. Labour can no longer win by relying on the loyal vote; nor by ignoring or losing it by tri-angulation – pandering to right wing or neo-liberal policies.

The implications for unions of the changing relationships are the reverse side of the same coin. All unions need to have a relationship with the Labour Party – but they need to decide which circle of influence they and their members want to be in. Is it inner or outer circle or beyond the pale? How are they best able to influence the Party; how do they want to work with Government – especially if it is the employer as well.

Unions need to multi-task – the world of the labour movement is now more complex – it is not just money and constitutional power. For affiliated unions it is about

maintaining a special relationship that represents the commitment they have made. It is partly about transparency; but, in the future, it will be more important to recognise it is no longer an exclusive, monogamous relationship, rather they are the major players in an alliance, but they are not in a civil partnership.

For non-affiliated unions – it is for both to recognise they need to have a relationship. Labour has scarcely recognised their existence until recently. It will be a policy based relationship – the chances of any union not already affiliated, affiliating now or in the future is not worth calculating. Non-affiliated unions need to establish a dialogue – recognising it is about building relationships for the future – to deal better with a future Labour administration than was the case with the last. It is about identifying areas of agreement. There will be policies they don't agree on, disputes and arguments. That should lead to more discussion and dialogue, not less.

Conversely Labour needs to understand that the people who work for public services are part of the 90%, and are tax payers, not just public sector employees. The key will be Labour winning trust as the provider of public services and as the ultimate employer of public servants. Public employees are committed to the services they deliver – they, their families and friends are a large section of the public who vote.

#### **“For an altogether higher status for labour”**

Labour – if it is no longer a Party exclusively of the unions; it needs to become a Party of labour. It needs to become a voice for un-represented workers – as do unions.

“Labour” does not just mean those in work – it is those seeking work, no longer able to work. It is the carers and the cared for. It is internationalist, not just British workers – but also migrant and immigrant workers. They need the

same enforceable standards. It is the unemployed youth and pensioners – too old to work - if allowed to retire!

It means those who live in the world of work, not those who live off it. It does not mean those who seek to demean the status of labour and undermine its institutions and organisations.

These people of labour – who are not in either the Party or a union: they should be a key target group for policies – both the Party and unions speaking on their behalf “for an altogether higher status for labour”. A voice for labour, addressing the wider world: speaking to them and the communities they live and work in.

The labour and trade union movement needs a long term solution; there is not an easy fix to resolve the public disaster of Grangemouth and the subsequent Labour link debate. Now the special conference is over, there is not just an opportunity, but a necessity to have the real discussion.

I am writing as a member of both the Party and an affiliated union for many years, but also, until last year, as an officer in a traditionally non-affiliated union – the PCS. If one set is Party members and the other is trade unionists – the overlap is those who are both – a declining number. In my experience in the past both Labour and the unions have focussed purely on the overlapping bit – the intersection – for the future it needs to focus on the whole picture. Labour. All of it, not just a slice.

# Case study

---

## Being Political

### John Smith, General Secretary of the Musicians' Union

Lobbying Government and Ministers is something that the MU does on behalf of musicians on an almost daily basis, and yet what it involves remains a mystery to many of our members. Having just had our political fund ballot, we faced a number of questions about the way in which we use the political fund and where the money goes.

Contrary to popular belief, the MU's political fund does not all go to the Labour Party. In reality, affiliation to the Labour Party accounts for just under half of the fund. The rest is spent on other political activity which is vitally important in protecting musicians' rights and livelihoods because, whether we like it or not, parliament still makes most of the decisions in this country.

Lobbying Ministers, MPs and MEPs on behalf of our members really does yield results. In the past few years alone, the MU's lobbying has helped to bring about:

- The Live Music Act
- Term Extension
- European Parliament legislation to make it easier for musicians to take their instruments on planes
- The Digital Economy Act
- The Beijing Treaty, which secured audiovisual rights for performers

On a day to day basis, we continue to press politicians on issues such as funding for arts and culture, fair payment for

musicians and protection of copyright. As a result of this lobbying, the MU has some very good and loyal friends amongst British MPs of all political persuasions.

The MU lobbies on its own for issues specific to musicians, but we also work with other performer groups on broader issues. This is invaluable for a medium sized union with limited resources. So the Performers' Alliance All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), made up of the MU, Equity and the Writers' Guild is also very active on behalf of musicians, actors and writers. The MU's political fund pays our share of the cost of this group and also helps to pay for its coordinator, Chloe Alexander, who also works for Kerry McCarthy MP and is based in parliament.

The Parliamentary Group has gone from strength to strength over recent years. We run yearly receptions in parliament where MU members are able to come to parliament and put their opinions direct to the politicians. In past years Ministers and Shadow Ministers have always attended this event to hear for themselves about the issues facing musicians today.

The group also holds meetings with key decision makers throughout the year. This year we have met with Peter Bazalgette, Chair of Arts Council England, we've held open meetings for MPs on issues like freedom of artistic expression and streaming services and questions have been asked by MPs in parliament on subjects like national insurance, private

copying and investment in music. MPs also spoke in parliament and questioned the Minister on the issue of professional musicians often being asked to work for free. The APPG briefs MPs on a regular basis to keep them up to date with issues affecting performers, and it contributed significantly to a Parliamentary debate in June on the economic and social importance of regional arts and the creative industries.

One of the major achievements of the APPG is that it is genuinely cross Party – something which is extremely rare for a trade union Parliamentary Group. Our officers consist of two Labour MPs, one Conservative MP, one Liberal Democrat Lord and a Scottish National Party (SNP) MP. The membership is made up of 68 MPs and Peers from all political parties. We are therefore able to call on political friends from all persuasions to help us achieve our lobbying successes mentioned earlier.

In addition to lobbying, the political fund also pays for any other activity that is deemed to be 'political'. Thanks to the political fund, therefore, the MU is able to donate to anti-fascist organisations such as Unite Against Fascism and Love Music Hate Racism. We are also able to support our trade union brothers and sisters by affiliating to Justice for Colombia and the Campaign for Trade Union Freedom amongst others.

The political fund, in short, allows the MU to be political – with both a small p and a capital P. It gives us the right to have a voice and to put forward the case for musicians to the decision makers in this country and abroad, and it makes a real difference.

## The Facts

- The MU deducts 2p for every whole pound you pay in subscriptions to go to the political fund.
- You do, however, have the right to opt out of the political fund at any point.
- The elected Executive Committee controls how the money is spent. The Executive is accountable to members through Conference and ensures that, when money is spent, a clear benefit can be seen for you.

# Why a trade union voice in politics matters

Mick Whelan, General Secretary of ASLEF

The post-Blairite Britain of 2014 is a harsh and hazardous landscape. Economic growth is fuelled by consumer spending on borrowed money and an ever overheating housing market. Our infrastructure creaks under the weight of decades of underinvestment and post-privatisation profiteering. We stare into the abyss of a decade of falling wages and a precarious future for our young people of debt and insecure housing and employment.

As the political class struggles to grasp the magnitude of the shifting political and economic terrain the opinions of working men and women become all the more vital. As political and industrial pressure groups trade unions know what is being said in workplaces and in communities each day. This is why a trade union voice in politics matters. Without that voice the views of ordinary working people will go unheard in the national political discourse.

A strong trade union voice in the debates of our time is as important today as it was 150 years ago. The Reform Act of 1867 was the springboard which gave trade unions renewed impetus to seek their long held aspiration of genuine working class political representation. Keir Hardie was an early advocate of this representation and voice at his first TUC on behalf of the Ayrshire miners in 1887 before his election as an independent labour MP in 1892. The inaugural meeting of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 was instrumental in setting out how the

representation of a distinct 'Labour Group' in parliament with a union voice at its heart could be realised.

The potential legal liabilities faced by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants following the Taff Vale judgement in 1901 gave the need for a trade union voice and representation additional focus and urgency. It was clear that unions needed to build their own political strength to resist attacks from the courts and elsewhere. The best way to do this was to get their members on to the green benches of the House of Commons.

As parallel and interlinked aspirations the need for a strong union voice in politics and greater working class representation, are both as urgently required today as they were in the late 19th century. As a longstanding affiliate of the Labour Party, ASLEF believes it has offered a positive and transparent contribution to internal and external policy debates on employment rights, rail policy and many other issues over recent years both as an individual union and through the forum of the Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation.

For example, the views of ASLEF and the other rail unions offer an important alternative view to those advocated by the rail industry's well-funded private operators as the Party continues to develop its policy. Along with our union colleagues we have produced substantial pieces of research such as the Rebuilding

Rail report which offered a blueprint for how Labour could genuinely reform rail and had been an important part of the ongoing policy process.

At an organisational level we work closely with the Party both nationally, regionally and locally through TULO forums, through regional executives and through direct links between local ASLEF branches and Constituency Labour Parties. London TULO, for example, is a strong group of affiliates who work alongside the regional director and regional Party, the city's MPs, AMs and councillors to maximise organisational capacity and trade union engagement in Party campaigns.

I also think there is a dynamic within the trade union voice between the general unions and the industrial unions. The general unions often have a large membership across industries and their voice reflects their strong organisational capability and diversity. We industrial unions tend to focus on a specific sector often with a high level of membership density, occupational identity and industrial leverage. The different cultures within these models of trade unionism have an impact on how we communicate our politics both internally and externally.

Many unions, including ASLEF, will be running our political fund ballots later this year. In terms of our internal political communications we will be at pains to point out to our members – post-Collins review – that the fund is for campaigning politically, not supporting the Labour Party, and that it allows us to campaign for public ownership of the railways, for high speed rail, for more freight on rail and other key policies.

The chief executive of Google Eric Schmidt recently said that the current generation of politicians spend too much time talking about issues and not addressing them. I agree with him and would suggest that this inability (at best) or unwillingness (at worst) of politicians from all parties to tackle the challenges

our country faces is a critical factor in why so many people are disengaged from mainstream politics.

I also believe that the narrow background from which so many of the modern political class are drawn is a real problem for our politics. The last train driver and ASLEF member to serve in Parliament was Archie Manuel who was MP for Central Ayrshire between 1950 and 1970. Around one in four members of the current Parliamentary Labour Party, for instance, have come from a background as a policy advisor. This isn't an apprenticeship for addressing the practical problems of the real world. Trade unions are in the business of negotiating solutions to challenges; an ability which matters in politics now more than ever.

ASLEF reintroduced political training for members last year after an absence of many years in order to demystify the process of how the political world works for our members and activists and to encourage them to consider being more active politically and standing in local authority or Parliamentary elections. We now have many members elected as Labour councillors across the UK and others with Parliamentary ambitions.

Trade unions know a thing or two about the world of work and industry. We believe we have the answers to many of the problems the politicians can't or won't address. Our members are the people who do the job; in ASLEF's case in the cab at the front of the train. This is one of the most important reasons why a trade union voice in politics matters. We have a hotline to the coalface. That hotline helps us offer solutions to the problems which beset our industries, both private and public.

This is one reason why my union has been exploring the idea of worker ownership in recent years. While we want to see a Labour Party committed to a publicly owned and publicly accountable railway we recognise the need for incremental steps towards this objective.

Greater worker involvement and/or control in the determination of their industry should be the bedrock of a progressive industrial strategy. ASLEF and others secured a commitment in the 2010 Labour manifesto to explore this option.

Taff Vale sparked an urgent need for the trade unions to seek greater political voice in 1901 and the Lobbying Act has had a similar impact in 2014 as it threatens to strangle the ability of unions and other groups to campaign through onerous regulation. The Act comes after a torrent of anti-union policies from the government ranging from Beecroft's war on red tape and health and safety to attacks on facility time and the operation of employment tribunals to name a few.

Every era has had political and economic challenges and for trade unions it is these which have made us who we are. Our voice is all the more important in this era of insecurity and uncertainty. Pete Seeger who died earlier this year always told activists never to give up and to overcome. And this we try to do.



